Reverse interviewing : a white adoptive mother engaging with black birth mothers and vice versa

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Reverse Interviewing: A White Adoptive Mother Engaging with Black Birth Mothers and Vice Versa

Abstract

Researcher reflexivity, meaning the revealing of the researcher's assumptions and her position vis-à-vis those researched, has by now become commonplace. This article explores such issues in the context of a larger study of transnational adoption for which I conducted interviews with South African birth mothers as both a researcher/interviewer and an adoptive mother. Instead of seeking to eliminate researcher bias, I propose using it as data that could reveal novel aspects of the phenomenon under study. This article specifically explores the use of reverse interviewing, which in this case meant disclosing my double positionality and inviting the interviewees to ask me questions. It is not a matter of merely extracting information: the technique allows participants to air their concerns, and facilitates investigation of the researcher's reactions to them. All this, in turn, carries implications with regard to how the study area is conceptualised.

Keywords: transnational adoption, birth mothers, reflexivity, reverse interviewing, South Africa

Introduction

It is now common practice to demand more reflexivity in social research, and in qualitative research in particular (Aaltonen & Högbacka 2015). Some scholars even refer to this as 'the reflexive turn' (Mauthner & Doucet 2003, 416–417). Reflexivity in this context usually implies turning the research lens on the researcher and investigating her role in the process and in the production of data: her own social, political and personal interests and assumptions are to be examined as well as her position in relation to those she researches (Gillies & Alldred 2002, 39–40). Closely tied to reflexivity is an emphasis on power relations in the research process (ibid. 43), and issues related to ethical research practices (Guillemin & Gillam 2004, 273–277). In an interview situation the interviewer is a lot more than a researcher, occupying positions within the hierarchical relations of power and inequity based on ethnicity, 'race', class, gender, sexuality, age and nationality, among other things. She is expected to make visible and contemplate her own location and how it affects the research at each step of the process (Edwards 1993, 184; Pillow 2003, 178).

One problem with such reflexivity is the potential use of these locations as badges or in litanies. It is often stated at the beginning or the end of research reports that the researcher is, for instance, 'a white, academic, middle-class and middle-aged woman'. Such litanies do not in themselves indicate whether these locations are important, and if they are why and in what ways (Behar 1996, 13). On the other hand, researchers may delve into their private selves

excessively or too deeply. In such cases the focus of the research turns inwards and becomes what has been called 'self-indulgent', 'narcissistic' and 'tiresome' (see Pillow 2003, 176). We learn a lot about the researcher and very little about the research topic or the lived experiences of the research subjects. As Ruth Behar (1996, 13–14) writes, the connections (intellectual but also personal and emotional) between the researcher and those who are researched must be explicated. However, she (1996, 14) also reminds us that the 'exposure of the self who is also a spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise get to. It has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake'. In other words, it has to be relevant to important social issues.

My aim in this article is neither to produce litanies nor to engage in personal confessions as such, but rather to reflect on the many ways I am implicated in the research I have conducted. Some scholars refer to this as revealing researcher bias (Teusner 2016). I make no attempt to eliminate researcher bias, and rather use the researcher's and the interviewees' reactions as data. Kleinman and Copp (1993, 54–56) urge researchers to utilise their connections with the research participants, and not to dismiss any uncomfortable feelings as personal hang-ups. Such feelings could indeed convey something about the topic under study. Self-reflection could become a means to understanding the other, and could sensitise us to the operation of power. Our uncomfortable feelings could help us understand how others might feel and why. The idea is to make sociological sense of our emotions and feelings and to use them as clues as if they were data to shed light on the phenomenon (Kleinman & Copp 1993). Emotions based on the scholar's position as part of the research field could also provide clues about the social organisation of the phenomena under study. Barbara Katz Rothman (1986) interviewed women who had had foetal amniocentesis, some of whom had later had abortions after receiving 'bad news'. She used her experience as a young mother and her own and the women's sorrow for 'what it tells about motherhood, about pregnancy, and about a society that develops this kind of technology – and expects gratitude for it' (Rothman 1986, 52). Griffith and Smith (1987), who interviewed middle-class full-time mothers providing their children with all kinds of educational and material resources to further their development, started to feel inadequate in their own mothering. This emotional reaction led them to 'analyze the unnoticed matrix of social organization that constructs both the interview talk and their emotional reaction to it' (cited in DeVault 1990, 104–105). This perspective has recently been labelled strong reflexivity, meaning that the researcher's relationship with the research field is understood as an epistemic resource and a valid source of data (Kuehner, Ploder & Langer 2016, 700).

One way of practising strong reflexivity is to reveal the researcher's roles to the study participants and to allow them to ask questions. Such self-disclosure has often been handled with reference to the general desirability of more reciprocal and just research relationships. Feminist researchers in particular have raised the issue of achieving 'good, honest and reciprocal relationships between the researcher and researched' (Birch & Miller 2002, 92). The ideal was thus to empower those who were being researched (Miller & Bell 2002, 65). Some scholars researching sensitive topics found that if the interviewer also shared something of her own life via self-disclosure it could mitigate the possible disturbing effects to the

interviewees, as the focus would shift from their feelings to those of the researcher (Edwards 1993, 193–194). Others are of the opinion that it may not be feasible or desirable to reveal personal issues to interviewees. Melanie Mauthner (2000, 299), for instance, introduced the concept of controlled self-disclosure, meaning that she kept her replies to interviewees' questions 'to a minimum': disclosing personal information to her interviewees made her feel vulnerable (ibid.). Moreover, the intention behind at least partial self-disclosure may well be to create 'rapport' with and thereby elicit more talk from interviewees and thus obtain 'better' data (see the discussion in Smyth & Mitchell 2008). Sangmi Lee (2015) is among the few researchers to have genuinely focused on what her interviewees asked her. She found such questions to be of the utmost importance in terms of her self-reflexivity, helping her to understanding her positionality. Her account reveals the many ways her interviewees understood the research and the role of the researcher (Lee 2015).

My approach to reverse interviewing here was to take the questions the research participants asked seriously, and to treat them and the reactions they induced in the researcher as data. This also required revealing the researcher, and not only the research participants, as vulnerable (Behar 1996). Such a perspective shares the concern of some forms of autoethnography, such as evocative autoethnography, with understanding the researcher as both the subject and the object of research, and with reflecting on the meaning of the researcher's anxieties and joys as well as having social change as a goal (Ploder & Stadlbauer 2016). Yet, my approach differs in that I focus on the queries of the respondents and not on myself. Before delving into the empirical results of this reverse interviewing I will explicate the methodological details of the research, and position the topic and the participants in a wider context. I will consider the phenomenon of transnational adoption in a global context given that it constitutes the setting in which adopters and birth mothers operate. The empirical part concentrates on the birth mothers' concerns and conceptions of adoption and adopters through a reversal of research roles allowing the interviewees to 'interview' me.

The research context

The research I refer to here is my larger study on transnational adoption for which I interviewed adoptive parents in Finland, and adoption social workers and birth mothers in South Africa (see Högbacka, forthcoming, for a full account). My research objective was to explore how adopting and placing children for adoption are connected, and shape as well as being shaped by larger global structures. The fact that I had previously adopted a South African child in many ways implicated me in the research. It also gave me easy access to other adopters and also to South African social workers.

My focus here is on the interviews with 35 black birth mothers I conducted during 2006-2009 in four different locations in South Africa. Before I launched the project many people warned me about the difficulty in finding the birth mothers. I was also told that they would probably not want to talk to a white woman from the other side of the globe about such sensitive issues. The adoption social workers at the three biggest adoption agencies in South Africa thus acted as significant gatekeepers. With their help I found the interviewees via several homes for pregnant women in crisis. When I went to the homes I was largely free to talk to whoever

happened to be there at the time, and the birth mothers I met appeared to be willing to share their stories. There was even a queue at my door in one home, and many of the women told me that they had never talked about the adoption before and that it was good to talk to me. I met some of the birth mothers because they were taking part in the skills-development programmes organised by the homes and were still around. In other cases the social workers contacted birth mothers they knew and asked them if they would like to talk to me. I assured everyone that participation was voluntary, and could be interrupted if it became too difficult: two mothers availed themselves of this option. I also told them that I was a university researcher with no ties to adoption organisations, and that I was going to write a book about the experiences of adopters and birth mothers. Many of the social workers had also mentioned to the birth mothers that I had adopted a South African child, and some of them saw me with my South African daughter.

The ages of the women varied between 14 and 43, but the majority of them were between 19 and 25. Some of them were still pregnant, although most had already relinquished their child for adoption. The shortest interview lasted 20 minutes, whereas most of them lasted 30-60 minutes. They took place in various locations: a separate room at the social workers' downtown office, a room in the birth mother's home, my home, and sometimes a coffee house near the birth mother's workplace. I conducted all except three of the interviews in English. These three were conducted in Afrikaans with the social worker as the interpreter, and they clearly differed in length and content from the others. They were a lot shorter and more constrained. I gave all the birth mothers Finnish chocolates as a token of my appreciation of their time. I used pseudonyms throughout to protect the anonymity of the informants.

I disclosed my double positionality as researcher and adopter to all the birth mothers because I did not think it was ethically justified to conceal it. I came to know a lot about them, whereas they did not know much about me. This kind of looking at without being known is one aspect of the white colonial gaze, which is an epistemic perspective of "seeing without being seen" and "a form of hegemony and control" (Yancy 2008, 6). It is typically the Global North that has studied the Global South, not vice versa. Given that many of the birth mothers already knew I had adopted a child I decided to raise the issue at the end of the interview. This would allow them to change their perspective from their own potentially difficult memories and experiences and focus on someone else's story (see also Edwards 1993, 193–194). At that point I invited the birth mothers to ask me anything they wanted to. Of the 35 interviewees, 26 asked me at least one question, and about half of those raised several. The interviews had been very emotional and often sad in tone. As I specifically pointed out, I had asked them many sensitive and personal questions and now it was their turn. I thought it was only fair that after exposing the birth mothers as extremely vulnerable I should also show my own vulnerability (see Behar 1996). I also intended to use this vulnerability as an analytical tool. In addition, I was the first white overseas adoptive mother many of the birth mothers had met. Revealing my position and allowing them to 'interview' me gave them the opportunity to acquire knowledge about adopters and the living conditions of adopted children.

For the purposes of this article I use my own location as a lens through which to investigate the vexed relationship between adoptive parents in the Global North and birth mothers in the

Global South. What do my reactions and emotions as an adoptive mother and as a white privileged 'other' from the Global North indicate about the relations between these two groups of women who are so differentially positioned in global hierarchies? How do the birth mothers see me and other adopters? In what way can reverse interviewing enhance research?

The contact zone of transnational adoption

To shed light on the relations in this research I should first explain the more general relationship between the Global North and the Global South. These terms refer both to geographical areas in the Northern and Southern hemispheres, respectively, and to material wealth and deprivation (Jolly 2008, 79–80). Adopters are from countries in the affluent Global North, in other words Northern America and Western Europe. The biggest countries of destination in terms of transnational adoption in 2014 were the USA, Italy, Canada and Spain, and the Nordic countries have also been prominent when the numbers of inhabitants are taken into account (Selman 2016). Adopted children come from the wider Global South: again in 2014 the biggest countries of origin were China, Ethiopia, Haiti and Ukraine (Selman 2016). There has been an increase in adoptions from many African countries in particular since the turn of the Millennium (Selman 2016). Although China's birth mothers are also constrained by the country's strict population policies, and Eastern European birth mothers have been caught in the transition of major economic and political structures, poverty and a lack of social support are behind the majority of inter-country adoptions (Högbacka, forthcoming).

The relationship between the Global North and South is characterised by unequal power relations. The Global North consisting of former colonial and imperial powers dominates the South. This dominance is material, the Global North benefiting from globally unequal trade relations (Castles 2003, 18). Mary Louise Pratt (2002, 29) uses harsher terms, stating that 'those "in front" are held up and pushed by those "behind"'. The dominance is also cultural, and some have used the term coloniality of power to describe this unequal relation: the world system under global coloniality persists in the global hierarchies of knowledge and power that privilege the modern West (Conway 2011, 217-218). Postcolonial theorists in particular point out the on-going tendency of the Global North to define its own metropolitan identity as universal and superior (Coronil 2000, 357-358; McEwan 2001). Postcolonial theory aims at exposing the ethnocentric assumptions of the West and revealing structures that depict previously colonised people as inferior. The West sees itself as universal and superior, and exercises a paternalistic and dominant role in 'guiding' the 'lesser' other (King 2008/2009, 426). Even though colonialism may have had its day, the 'racist and ethnocentric rationales for it linger' (Perry 1998, 135).

Transnational adoption can be depicted as a contact zone that brings together these various actors. The term was coined by Pratt (1992, 4), who defines contact zones as 'social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today'. This puts the emphasis on potential conflicts of views among the different parties and on the power relations between them. The fact that white adoptive parents are able to travel to the other side of the globe to become

parents illustrates the hierarchical divide between adoptive and birth mothers. The same holds true for researchers from the Global North carrying out studies in the Global South. The fact that I as both a researcher and an adoptive mother was able to get in touch with the birth mothers is itself an indication of these power relations. The global organisation of labour and the spatialization that allows meetings between birth mothers and adopters to take place should be brought into the open and explicated instead of being concealed. The international division of labour has already placed us in differentiated positions (see Ahmed 2000, 167-168).

As many researchers have shown, it is evident that power is also shifting and situated, and a function of interaction (Kadianaki 2014), hence interviewees also have power (Thapar-Björkert & Henry 2004). Here, however, I understand power as emanating from structural positions that personal decisions cannot overcome: in other words it goes beyond relational approaches. I understand it as both inherent in research roles with the researcher/interviewer having a more powerful position as the author, and as emanating from historically formed unequal group possession of valued resources (Layder 1993, 153), in this case from those prevailing in the global order. Next I consider the potential of reverse interviewing to shake the white colonial gaze of the Global North.

Reverse interviewing

'Where is the birth mother of your child?'

Transnational adoption, as several writers note, is characterised by a clean-break approach to the transfer of children from the Global South to the Global North. In the legislation and in practice all ties to the child's previous kin are severed and recreated exclusively with the new adoptive family (Yngvesson 2010). Under this system the birth mother might bring her child to social workers or a children's home today and be dispensed with tomorrow. The child then becomes a social orphan. Birth mothers in South Africa do not have other options: if they cannot afford to keep their child adoption is often the only alternative (Högbacka, forthcoming). Indeed, they are rarely talked about in the adoption process. Westerners focus on children perceived to be in need, who are seen in isolation and not as already having kin relations and being part of a community (King 2008/2009).

The subject of the birth mother is a touchy one among adoptive parents, who worry about interference and even fear that she might take the child back (Högbacka, forthcoming). Some favour countries in which the birth mothers cannot be located, so the child comes with no strings attached (Jacobson 2008, 93; Seligmann 2013, 48). Adoptive parents thus do not easily talk about the birth mother. I, as an adoptive mother, was no exception. I originally had some information about the birth family of my child, but was told they had not been involved since and could not be located. When I was conducting the research in South Africa I was in a position to make some enquiries about my child's birth mother, and by chance found information about her. There was also a phone number, and I remember the social worker saying to me: 'You do realise that if I phone, she is going to want to see her child'. Before I could stop myself in my mind I quickly counted the exits in the office building. In other words, I was worried about losing the child. I did not manage to make contact then, but we

have since met and have established on-going communication.

At the time I was also a bit shaken by the many questions that the mothers I interviewed posed about the birth mother of my child. This was by far the most frequently raised issue. The mothers firmly brought the birth mother back into the picture, and it was not always easy to answer their direct questions about her. They wanted to know where 'our' birth mother was and whether I knew or had wanted to know anything about her. The following questions from four different birth mothers illustrate this: they brought home the message that there was no such thing as a 'free-standing' child.

> Okay. But I will like to know, if, do you know the whole story of the mother for the child? (Lerato, 31, child adopted five years previously)
>
> So would you be willing to say she had a birth mom and just like find out what's happened? (Lucille, 38, child adopted 12 years previously)
>
> Do you know her parents? (Bontle, 18, child adopted a month previously)
>
> Where is the birth mother of your child? (Cindy, 22, child adopted a year previously)

They also inquired more directly about the position of 'our' birth mother in connection with the child. Did the child not remember her birth mother? This indicates the common African understanding of the importance of mother-child relations and of the ties between a mother and all her children, which are understood to be unbreakable (Oyewumi 2000). Lily, 37, who raised this, was in a desperate situation, not having the means to look after her child, but she had told the social workers that she nevertheless wanted to keep it. She had recently given birth and was still staying in a maternity home whereas her infant was in a separate baby home. The way she asked about my child's possible memories implied that she would also have wished to be remembered. As is evident from my hesitant answer, I felt awkward and the question took me by surprise. I had not asked my child this question. It is not easy to bring another mother into the picture when you have only just been appointed the mother of the child. At first even the word mother (as in birth mother) stuck in my throat. The idea of two mothers is difficult for adoptive mothers in particular when the children are small and not a lot of time has elapsed since the adoption (Ge et al. 2008, 538).

> Lily (birth mother): How old your baby?
> Riitta (adoptive mother): She is five now, she was two when I got her.
> Lily: Okay. She remembers nothing?
> Riitta: Maybe not. [...]
> Lily: Did you ask her, do you remember your mommy?

The birth mothers also raised the number-one worry of adoptive mothers that they may want the child back. The first time I was asked how I would react if the birth mother wished to reclaim the child made me feel really uncomfortable, and the mere thought of it upset me. The birth mothers raised this question half-humorously, however, somehow acknowledging the

possibility that one child could be equally loved by two sets of parents. Lerato, 31, had recently returned wanting to know about her son, who had been adopted five years earlier. The possible reaction of adopters to the reappearance of the birth mother was on her mind a lot. Margaret, 33, had recently given birth. She was the only married woman among my interviewees and had made the adoption decision together with her husband. She was curious about, but also understood, the adopters' reactions.

> Okay, one more thing that I want to know, what if one day you just found out that she is there, right there looking and she wants her child back. What will you do? (Lerato, 31, child adopted five years previously)
>
> Margaret (birth mother): But if now she comes back and says she wants her baby back.
> Riitta (adoptive mother): (gasps) Ooooh.
> Margaret: What are you going to do?
> Riitta: I don't know.
> Margaret: Because you've bonded so much with her.

The birth mothers wondered whether we adopters would tell our children that they were adopted. These questions implicitly put the focus on birth mothers and the original kin, as to talk about the adoption also raises the issue of the family of origin. The next two excerpts from two very different birth mothers highlight these issues. Lebohang was still pregnant but had just chosen adoptive parents for her child. Lucille, on the other hand, had placed her child for adoption 12 years previously but had only returned recently because the need to know was so strong. They both wanted to know when the children were told of their backgrounds.

> How do they feel? And like when do you tell them they are adopted? Do you tell them from the beginning? (Lebohang, 19, pregnant)
>
> Lucille (birth mother): So most of, as you and your adoptive parents, will you tell the child that she is adopted?
> Riitta (adoptive mother): Yes.
> Lucille: At what age?

The mothers I interviewed took the initiative in raising the issue of the birth mother's position in adoption vis-à-vis adopters. They clearly considered the children still to be part of their kin group and ancestry, and considered it essential for them to know about this membership and belonging regardless of where they lived. My reactions to their enquiries about the birth mother of my child reflect adopters' mixed feelings in general about the 'other' mother.

'Is she a black child?'

The other big cluster of questions addressed to me revolved around the issue of 'race' and the 'different' looks of the adopters and the children. The South African birth mothers were very

sensitive to the position of a black child in a white family and a white community. Given the troubled racial past and memories of apartheid as well as the continuing economic inequality among whites and blacks in South Africa they worried about the consequences of white adoptions of black children. They wanted to know if there had been any instances of racial prejudice related to my own and others' adoptions, and feared that black children may not be completely accepted as members of their new families and as belonging to the new communities more widely. Almost all of the mothers were surprised that I had not adopted a white child, which is what they initially assumed. In fact, white children are not allowed by law to leave the country because there are so many families in South Africa queuing for them. As the following comments indicate, the birth mothers wanted to know about the reactions of my close family and of other Finnish people.

> And how did like your friends, your parents react when you said 'I'm going to adopt a black'? (Sibongele, 20, pregnant)
>
> So how is it to raise a black child? Uh, from the community don't hear some different, but ignorant question or what? (Elsie, 27, child adopted a year previously)
>
> So, in your country they don't surprise when you adopt a black? (Miriam, 25, child adopted over a year previously)

The related questions of another birth mother, Lebohang, further show that some of the concerns related to the fact that in the case of cross-racial adoptions it is immediately obvious that the child was not born to the adoptive family. As she said, this raises the question of whose child it is. Again, this shifts the focus to the birth mother and birth kin.

> It doesn't feel weird to raise somebody else's child sometime? And it's not the same colour, don't people look at you like whose child is that she's walking with? [...] And your family, don't they get shocked or something when you come back with the child? (Lebohang, 19, pregnant)

The birth mothers' concern about racism resonates with what many adult adoptees have recalled about their experiences: According to the findings of this research, adoptees of colour have been targets of racialised micro- and macro-aggression (Koskinen 2015), gazes and racism (Hübinette & Tigervall; Rastas 2007). The experiences of adoptees and the fears of birth mothers are strangely contradictory to the views of most adoptive parents and the general accepted way of talking about adoption. Many adopters remain 'blind' to racism and tend to underestimate it, as their focus is solely on making the child their own. As has been pointed out, when we claim others as our own we underline similarity to us and our cultural ways while playing down differences such as ethnic markers (Boltanski 1999, cited in Horsti 2009, 80). Tobias Hübinette (2012) explicates the process of colour-blindness in adoption by which 'race' becomes a taboo subject. Colour-blindness in this sense points to the

unwillingness to acknowledge the continuing salience of race in society. Many adoptive parents may not be aware of the everyday racism their children encounter outside the home (Koskinen 2015; Rastas 2007; Ruohio 2009), or of their own racial privilege (see Bashi Treitler 2014). These birth mothers, however, were very aware of how racism operates.

The birth mothers also used phenotypical 'racial' difference as an indication not only of shared ethnicity but also of shared kinship via genetic similarity. The fact that the brown-skinned child in its new white family and surroundings is visibly different could also be taken as evidence of its belonging to another family. The mothers wondered how the child would take it. They thought that the difference in looks might induce the child to ask questions that would eventually lead it to its birth kin. Similar hair texture and skin colour, for example, might invoke ideas of relatedness. Charis Thompson (2001) discovered a similar mechanism at work in the case of women who were undergoing fertility treatment, hoping to conceive through donated ova: there was a merging of ethnicity and genetic links. Among my interviewees, Elsie, Lucille and Margaret all raised the issue of the child's realising that it was different from the adoptive parents, and would consequently want to know about the background of the adoption and the absent birth mother.

> So did she ever ask you reason why she's black and you are white? [...] It wasn't difficult to explain her? (Elsie, 27, child adopted a year previously)

> In a situation like this, would you like to explain to the child that, because you know, somebody needs to be blamed, why am I living with this white woman and where is my black mom and what what what. (Lucille, 38, child adopted 12 years previously)

> Maybe she ask herself 'I'm looking the same like that one. Isn't she my sister or brother or what?' (Margaret, 33, has signed consent form)

Played down by the adopters but emphasised by the birth mothers, racism and race-based alignments would appear to be important aspects worthy of consideration. As far as the birth mothers are concerned, 'race' and ethnicity are both a source of potential problems in cross-racial adoptions, and a source of hope in the possibility of re-claiming the child on some level.

'How is it to live with a baby you didn't give birth to?'

The birth mothers asked me many personal questions, just as I had asked them. They wanted to know whether I was married or single, and whether I had other children apart from my daughter. They appeared genuinely surprised, even shocked, to learn that she was my only child. Within the context of 'the unique African desire for children' (Therborn 2006, 21), it was odd for a woman of my age to have just one child, and most of them had others.

Many wanted to know how it felt to become a mother through transnational adoption. They asked about the bonding between parent and child, wanting to make sure I, and by extension

other adoptive mothers, cared about the child. Among their comments were:

> You know, how does it feel when you for the first time you're holding your kid? [...] You are close? (Natie, 27, child adopted a year previously)

> But now how you do you feel when you saw her, (inaudible) in your arms? (Mary, 34, child adopted a month earlier)

The majority of children in South Africa are cared for within existing kinship structures. The extended family, and grandmothers in particular, look after them (Hall, Meintjes & Sambu 2014). Among black South Africans the family refers to a wider group than those currently living together: it extends spatially and in temporal terms (Högbacka, forthcoming). The birth mothers thus asked about the nature of adoptive parenting and the parent-child relationship when genetic links and common ancestry were missing. Many questions revolved around whether I was content with the child.

> So how is it to live with a baby that you didn't give birth to? (Margaret, 33, has signed consent form)

> Okay, but you love her, in Finland you love the child? (Lerato, 31, child adopted five years previously)

> And you're happy about it? (Natie, 27, child adopted a year previously)

These mothers wondered about the children and their feelings. Indeed, a pressing post-adoption issue for those I interviewed was their wish to receive news of how their child was faring (Högbacka, forthcoming). They knew beforehand that I was not in a position to bring them news about their children, so they questioned me about my child and her wellbeing. This was understandable given that their children had gone for adoption.

> So how is she now, the daughter? (Molly, 20, child adopted a year previously)

> And she's happy? (Elsie, 27, child adopted a year previously)

> And the child, how do they feel? (Lebohang, 19, pregnant)

The birth mothers also specifically talked about potential problems in the adoptive parent-child relationship. I was asked if I occasionally felt estranged from a child who did not carry my genes. Bontle was among those who inquired about this. She was parenting her first-born child and had placed the last-born for adoption. The adopted children are the other party to this relationship, and some of the mothers wondered whether they, too, might feel estranged. This was also implicit in other accounts but was voiced most directly by Sindiswa, who was in a position to keep her child.

> How do you take her? Do you take her as your own child or you sometimes, when she's like making you angry, don't you feel, like, she's not even, you know, your blood? You don't feel something like that? (Bontle, 18, child adopted a month previously)

> How do you find the attitude of the children you've adopted, they don't feel like oh she is not my mother or? (Sindiswa, 26, is keeping her baby)

Others correspondingly asked what I had found out from my interviews with adoptive parents more widely in Finland. They were concerned about what would happen later on in the adoptive relationship. Some feared that if the adopters went on to have biological children, their feelings and those of the new children towards the adopted child might change: they were worried that genetic ties would annul adoptive ties.

> Since you've been doing all these interviews with the parents that adopted their baby, did you ever experience a problem? Maybe those parents doesn't look after their children fine or what? [...] Maybe that time they are still young, they accept her, then when they grow up maybe they're starting to change and saying 'you're not my biological father's child'. (Margaret, 33, has signed consent form)

The birth mothers also asked me tough questions about the future. Although single mothering is very common in South Africa, it differs in form from the prevalent practice in Finland and the Global North. South African single mothers tend to live with their own mothers and/or other kin, matriarchal family structures having become even more common (Lee 2009, 61). This ensures that even if the mother were no longer capable of looking after it, the child would have many other willing carers within the kin group. Parenting in the Global North and Finland, on the other hand, follows the nuclear model, and although single mothering has become more common, it tends to be isolated and only to comprise the mother and the child. Therefore, the question of what would become of the child if the mother died or was incapacitated is entirely valid. It is evident in the following conversation I had with a birth mother I call Hope that I started feeling slightly uncomfortable with the question and stammered a little. I finally acknowledged the existence of kin (the child's grandparents and her uncle's family), but Hope pressed on, emphasising the potential uncertainty in the position of the child with people she had not been living with and who lacked genetic kinship ties. Hope, 20, was an illegal immigrant from Zimbabwe. Her child had been adopted only a week earlier. In asking me the following difficult question she was, in effect, also criticising the feasibility of the belief that adopters in the Global North necessarily live longer, and hence foreseeing possible adverse consequences for the children.

> Hope (birth mother): Yeah. When you're going to die, and then who's gonna take care of, about this child?
> Riitta (adoptive mother): If I die?
> Hope: Yeah.

> Riitta: Yeah, uh, yeah. (inaudible) my parents, well, my parents are (inaudible), I have a younger brother who's had, have three children.
> Hope: They gonna treat her like you?

As mentioned above, two birth mothers decided to interrupt the interview because of the sad memories it evoked. However, many others felt that participating in the study was a good decision. Some of them had not told anyone about the adoption, in fact, and for them talking about it was a positive experience. The fact that they were invited to ask me questions was also mentioned as an advantage. Even the two who interrupted the interview continued the conversation by asking me questions: this gave them something in return, ensuring that they were not treated as mere sources of information. The following remarks of two birth mothers at the very end of the interview illustrate this point.

> It was really good for me today and helped me a lot. (Zandi, late 20s, children adopted eight years and three years previously to the same family abroad)

> I think I asked everything I want to know and I'm happy I got a chance to speak to you. (Rosina, 22, child adopted eight months previously)

Conclusion

On reflection, it is clear that my encounters with the South African birth mothers were not only between a researcher and a research participant or an adoptive and a birth mother, but also between the Global North and the Global South. The position of the Northern international adopter is in every way more powerful than that of the birth mother: the former gains a child, whereas the latter must let it go. Research also clearly advances academic careers in the North, whereas the participants become 'raw data'. Even though such structural features cannot be overturned by individual decisions, I suggest that reversing the research roles and paying attention to the concerns of interviewees could destabilise the setting. Allowing interviewees to question the researcher gives them the opportunity to address issues that are important to them: they gain something and the researcher is no longer merely extracting information. In this case it enabled the birth mothers to learn something about the attitudes and experiences of adopters and, by extension, the wellbeing of their children in adoptive homes. In addition, in openly revealing the 'knower' reverse interviewing works to combat colonial gazing: the researcher, and not only the research participant, is shown to be vulnerable. This is a step towards doing research with participants and not only about them.

Reverse interviewing is also a methodological tool. Questions formulated and posed by participants work as an eye-opener and could change the focus of the research, revealing hidden Ethnocentrism and Global Northism in this case. The emphasis the birth mothers placed on the continuing maintenance of ties between the adopted child and its family of origin and ancestry led to their re-centring. My focus shifted from giving equal weight to the family lives of the adopters and the birth mothers to investigating the process whereby birth mothers are systematically faded out of the lives of their children in adoption practices (see

Högbacka, forthcoming). Likewise, taking on the role of a research informant enabled me to study my own reactions and thus the responses of an adopter to the birth mothers' questions. The occasional stammering indicates the existence of powerful emotions, which in turn raises important issues. I was emotionally startled, for instance, when the birth mothers somehow expressed doubt about the inherent goodness and superiority of adoption, which has constituted the implicit foundation of adoption practices. This further prompted the analysis of the unequal relationship between the two mothers. I ended up placing my study firmly within the context of the Global North and the Global South (Högbacka, forthcoming).

It could be claimed from these results that reverse interviewing has the potential to reveal novel angles of the phenomenon under study, namely by giving attention to both the kind of questions interviewees address to the researcher and the kind of reactions and emotions such questions provoke. Researcher bias is thus made use of as data rather than being seen as something needing to be eliminated.

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